

Is AIDS a Judgment of God?

Michael J. Christensen

People have been forced to cope with plagues and deadly disease for centuries. In every case, opportunities to respond with fear or courage were present. Apocalyptic and judgmental interpretations of plague and pandemic are prevalent in the history of disease, but within the crisis moments have been opportunities for transcendence, redemption, reinterpretation, and counter-apocalyptic measures. Anti- or counter-apocalyptic ministry, rather than solidarity with the apocalyptic mind-set of marginalized communities, is sometimes called for. Such is the case with the “plague” of HIV and AIDS in the world.

Plagues and Pestilence in Ancient Times

Before Pharaoh would heed the command of God through Moses to “let my people go!” the Lord had to stir up the waters of the Nile to cause a plague of frogs to overtake the whole country. This was followed by other plagues and pestilence: gnats, flies, livestock disease, festering boils on humans and beasts, hailstorms, locusts, total darkness, and finally a plague of death on the firstborn sons of Egypt (Exod. 8-11).

Leprosy in Bible times was considered an “unclean,” contagious disease, a sign of God’s judgment and disfavor, requiring purification rites from a priest (Lev. 13). Lepers were stigmatized by society, quarantined as “unclean”—both physically and spiritually—and excluded from the community of faith. No one dared to touch a leper for fear that the sinful disease would be caught. Among the many people Jesus healed were ten lepers (Luke 17:12).

Following Jesus’ example, early Christians confronted plague and pestilence. “In AD 252 plague broke out in Carthage,” writes William Barkley in his commentary on Philippians, “the heathen threw out the bodies of their dead, and fled in terror. Cyprian, the Christian bishop, gathered his congregation together and set them to burying the dead and nursing the sick in that plague-stricken city, and by so doing they saved the city, at the risk of their own lives, from destruction and desolation.”¹

In the sixteenth century, the bubonic plague is believed to have wiped out one-third of Europe’s population. In London, according to historical records, most physicians fled their practices and many clergy deserted their pulpits. Seventy thousand of the 400,000 citizens died from this disease. We know that the Black Plague was interpreted apocalyptically as a form of Divine

judgment from records of Masses being offered for repentance and healing in time of pestilence.²

In the 1830s, when cholera was rampant in America, the rich blamed the poor and burned their dwellings to stop the spread of the disease. During the early 1900s, tuberculosis was the feared disease, and those who got it were committed to sanatoriums against their will. Between 1918 and 1920, influenza killed over 500,000 people in America, causing fear and hysteria in many countries.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the AIDS pandemic has gripped the developing world, and is interpreted by many as an apocalyptic sign of the end of the age and/or as illustration of God’s judgment on immoral behavior.

Is AIDS a Judgment of God?

In the book of Revelation, John saw a vision of seven angels with seven bowls with seven plagues: “The first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and a foul and painful sore came on those who had the mark of the beast . . .” The wrath of God in the form of plague and pestilence, blood and bitterness, fire and brimstone, is poured out on unbelievers and those who worship the image of the beast (Rev. 16).

I remember growing up during apocalyptic times in Southern California, seeing the film—“A Thief in the Night”—at church and fearing that I would be left behind to endure the wrath of God in the Great Tribulation. When I was a pastor in San Francisco in time of AIDS, many Christians viewed AIDS as a sign of the end of the world. I kept busy countering the predominant apocalyptic view in evangelical and fundamentalist churches that “AIDS was God’s judgment on the homosexual lifestyle” or as “punishment for IV drug use.” I remember trying to help people process (including those in my own congregation) why it was that those whose behavior put them at high risk got AIDS from a virus, not as a punishment from God for immorality.

Rather than countering such arguments directly, I found it instructive to ask theological questions: “If AIDS is a ‘plague sent by God’ to punish homosexuals, then why do more gay men get AIDS than lesbians whose ‘lifestyle’ you consider sinful? How specific and targeted is God’s judgment on particular sins in this lifetime? If AIDS is part of God’s wrath, then should Christians rejoice and participate in God’s judgment? If AIDS is God’s judg-

Within the crisis moments have been opportunities for transcendence, redemption, reinterpretation, and counter-apocalyptic measures.

ment on immoral lifestyles, why is God so selective about who gets punished? Why does AIDS tend to affect gay men, African women, and Black and Hispanic populations disproportionately? Is immorality any more prevalent in Africa than in America or more common in minority communities than in the white majority in American society? **If AIDS is a direct consequence of sin, then why do the innocent suffer? Does God punish children for the sins of their parents?**"

"The judgment theory of AIDS raises more moral questions than it answers," I argued. The facts show that AIDS is no respecter of persons. It spreads in specific ways regardless of the sexual orientation or spiritual condition of the transmitter or receiver. Avoiding certain sexual activities, taking precautions, limiting oneself to one sexual partner, avoiding IV drug use, and the screening of blood donations will reduce the risk of AIDS, but the disease can potentially infect anyone.

I remember telling my apocalyptic brothers and sisters that the problem with "plague theology"—attributing sickness and disease directly to God's intention to punish sinners—is that it gives false justification for God's people not to get passionately involved with those who suffer, as evidenced in the comment of one Christian layperson who asked me: "Why are you trying to interfere with what God is doing in the world?"

"Rather than viewing AIDS as a punishment for sin," I preached to my flock, "perhaps we should come to understand AIDS as a 'word' from God—a call to God's people to withhold judgment and respond with compassion to those who otherwise might die without knowing they are loved."³

Plague Theology of HIV/AIDS

Persistent famines, pestilence, civil wars, and extreme poverty have wrecked havoc on the continent of Africa. As Bono of U2 says: "The continent is ablaze and we have to help put out the fire!" If no corrective measures are taken now, it is estimated that Africa will have 20 million HIV/AIDS orphans by 2010.

Malawi, with its 12 million residents, is particularly vulnerable to famine and disease, and suffers disproportionately from extreme poverty and AIDS. Currently, AIDS infects 14 percent of the population and accounts for over 85,000

deaths per year, leaving 950,000 AIDS-affected orphans.

The judgment theory or plague theology of AIDS is still prevalent in Malawi, I have learned from my pastoral education work there. Many pastors and people view AIDS as a punishment and condom use as indication of immorality. It is difficult to get pastors to find other ways to talk about HIV transmission than moralistic condemnation of premarital sex and multiple partners. It a challenge to reflect theologically on why people get AIDS in a culture that assumes that their affliction is the result of divine punishment for sin or a curse from a witchdoctor in the bush. Enlightened biblical teaching and appropriate pastoral care often are lacking in many churches.

The state of the church is rapidly changing, however, as the rate of infection in the country rises, and as the church community is confronted with daily reality of AIDS in their midst. The majority of the people in Malawi attend church, and the church tends to mirror the culture at large in terms of infection and transmission. Thus, the church is starting to deal with the issues around HIV/AIDS among the membership.

Required in the war on AIDS in Africa are counter-apocalyptic preaching, teaching and training and a church-based approach to prevention. International NGO and government-sponsored AIDS education is not enough (nor the most effective approach). What is needed is a carefully targeted, grassroots, faith-based, biblically-informed, theologically-sound, practical approach to AIDS education and character development within the churches. Such is the approach of CitiHope's Pastoral and Congregational Care Training program (PACCT)—which has trained a total of 75 pastors and church leaders in ways to deal with the various issues of HIV/AIDS in the congregation.

CitiHope's PACCT program, I believe, can be seen as a case study in counter-apocalyptic theological reflection on the judgment theory of AIDS in an African culture inclined toward "plague theology" and other potentially harmful apocalyptic interpretations linking sin and suffering. For further information and theological reflections, see my blog: <http://malawi-mission.blogspot.com>

1. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, The Daily Study

Bible (Westminster, 1959), 62-63.

- I attended a "Mass in time of AIDS" in San Francisco in the early 1980s that was revived from a "Medieval Mass in Time of Plague," which first alerted me to the apocalyptic dimension of AIDS in our time.
- See my books, *City Streets City People* (Abingdon Press, 2001) and *The Samaritan's Imperative: Compassionate Ministry to Persons Living with AIDS* (Abingdon Press 2002) for more context on AIDS in the 1980s in America.



Michael J. Christensen is Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Drew University where he teaches Practical Theology. He also serves as Africa Regional Director

for CitiHope International, a Christian relief and development NGO focused on food security and health care in developing countries. He has published several books, including *The Samaritan's Imperative: Compassionate Ministry with Persons Living with AIDS* (Abingdon Press, 2002).

Senior Pastor

Growing Presbyterian church seeks dynamic preacher.

We are looking for a gifted teacher who preaches the Word of God with enthusiasm, conviction and relevance.

We are an evangelical Presbyterian church (PCUSA) just west of Chicago, committed to outreach, personal transformation and discipleship. Due to our proximity to downtown, we attract professionals who want to live in an historic community close to work with great public schools. Accordingly, our 500+ members have far-reaching impact for Christ.

Please send resume/CV to Larry Williams at gymfanfa@usa.net.